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By-Mathieu, Gustave

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A description of the audiolingual nature of second languages as they are learned by all children introduces this discussion of the suitability of teaching foreign languages to the visually handicapped and the added dimension it would give to life. The role of the language laboratory in learning a foreign language is stressed. An annotated bibliography is included. (AF)

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A Second Language Means A Second Sight

GUSTAVE MATHIEU

I AM a language teacher interested in new and better methods of teaching foreign languages. You are specialists eager to find new and better methods of educating visually handicapped children and youth. Perhaps you will synthesize my specialty with yours to establish a link between what I have to offer and what you have to offer for the benefit of these children.

Visually handicapped children are not handicapped when it comes to learning foreign languages. Today, more and more children are learning foreign languages by a method which does not require books, pencils, or eyes. Call it what you will: oral-aural, aural-oral, audio-oral, audio-lingual, direct, functional, or, if you wish, the natural method. All these fancy appellations proclaim what every mother has observed: that children learn their first, *i.e.* native language by listening, then imitating sounds and speech patterns—until through daily exposure, practice, and correction—they venture to say things on their own. Only long after they have mastered the sounds and structures of language are they introduced to the written language, first through reading and later by writing.

The Sound of Language

Language is, first of all, speech—something one says and hears, and only secondarily what is written in books. The very etymology of *language* from the Latin, *lingua* (tongue), proves this. It is only in the audio-lingual or hearing-speaking element that language is on its own, that it is fully independent, that it can operate and create from its own source. Many civilizations have existed without any written form of language, and if Gutenberg had invented the magnetic tape instead of the printing press, Shakespeare would probably have "voiced" his plays and poems on tape and we would not go to the library but to the "tapery" to listen to them. Actually, this is what he intended us to do. The visual elements of language are mere derivations which depend for their existence on the spoken language. *Gestures* perceived by the eye may reinforce the spoken message but are not essential.

Writing is merely a reflection of spoken language —and a very poor one at that—as we can easily realize if we open a dictionary. We find words printed in two codes: one which indicates conventional spelling and the other which attempts to reflect pronunciation. It is an "attempt," because phonetic symbols, however ingenious, cannot do the job of telling us what word sounds are like, as perfectly as the groove on a disk or the magnetized particle on a tape. In short, language is above all sounds, an activity capable of being carried on and learned without vision. In fact, seeing the written form of a spoken language represents a handicap in the learning process because the learner usually transfers his English speaking habits to the foreign language. In a recent class of high school pupils who were learning Spanish by the audio-lingual method, the children were pronouncing *ahora* in perfect fashion except for Johnny who sounded the *h*. The teacher knew immediately what had happened: Johnny had been reading secretly and admitted so! If you want to find out how *seeing* French or German can spoil your *knowing* French or German, I suggest that you practice with those delightful but dangerous books *Fractured French*, by F. S. Pearson, and *Mangled Saxon*, by Carl Kern.

A visual handicap is therefore not a handicap in

• GUSTAVE MATHIEU is chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages, Orange County State College, Fullerton, California.

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learning a second language. And today we know that it should be learned in the same natural sequence in which we learned our first language, namely, without a book until the learner has fully mastered the entire sound—and most of the structural system of the language. Everywhere the hearing-speaking-reading-writing progression is rapidly replacing the old grammar-translation-vocabulary method. And, more and more, teachers are now adopting the tenet that the learner should only "say what he has heard, read what he has heard and said, and write only what he has heard. said, and read."

Much of our failure in the past ("I had two years of French and I don't speak a word of it") lies in the fact that we refused to recognize that language is a skill and not a rational discipline. Skills are not learned in books. They are mastered by practice. A skill mastered to perfection becomes a habit and language consists of the performance of a very complex set of habits as does typing, playing piano, or driving a car. Knowing the history of the origin of typewriters, pianos, or cars is a worthwhile endeavor and so is a course in the analysis of their component parts. But typing, playing, or driving is learned only by practice—as is indeed speaking. Language is not something one talks *about*, but something one *talks;* it is not something one *thinks about*, but something one *does*. It is best learned not by analysis but analogy, not by pondering about it but by practicing it.

Language Through Practice

Once we acknowledge that language is a skill which can be mastered by practice, we have also disposed of the old wives' tale that only the gifted can learn and should be allowed to learn a foreign language. To be sure, there will always be different rates at which learners will progress. But when a language is taught by the audio-lingual method there can be no "F" grades or we would have to "flunk" most of the human race. As Margaret Mead has pointed out, an IQ of 95 plus will do because languages have been built by the human race so that they can be learned by anybody. Many of us think only English was made that way. Witness the mother who consoled her boy after he had failed Spanish with: "Isn't it lucky you weren't born in Spain because then you couldn't talk at all." It is often quite a shock for the American student to discover that his native tongue which he speaks fluently is just as complex and irrational as German or French. Indeed, there seems to be no direct relationship between general intelligence and language aptitude when the language is taught by the audio-lingual method. For then "grammar" is no longer taught in the traditional way of puzzles to be solved intellectually by memorized rules· it is learned by practicing the structures until they become second nature to the learner. In this fashion the "complicated" form "Il faut que j'aille" is mastered just as easily during the first weeks as "Je vais"—that is, if Johnny isn't told that he has been using the subjunctive all along! In short, given enough time, practice, motivation. and inspired teaching anyone can develop the "habit" of speaking French, Russian, or for that matter Swahili. Nevertheless, the younger the learner, the better. Readiness for language learning diminishes after puberty. To quote the joke about the American businessman who visited China and exclaimed: "Why can this four-year-old Chinese kid speak Chinese and I can't?"

Practice and Application

This observation points to the fac that the best way of mastering a foreign language is to live for a few years in the country where the language is spoken. Short of this, the next best way is to re-create as much of the native environment as possible by affording the learner ample opportunity to practice the language. Language laboratories constitute an important adjunct to the classroom in this goal; indeed, they are such an effective tool, if properly used, that they are *the* key to language learning in the *new* key.

In the laboratory all the learners can repeat and speak at the same time—all the time. Every learner is a fulltime student.

If language is learned by hearing, listening. and imitating those who speak it fluently, it follows that every time Johnny hears a mistake he learns a mistake. At one blow the laboratory eliminates this harmful classroom feature. In the laboratory Johnny no longer hears the imperfect pronunciation and garbled versions of his classmates.

Every learner has a private tutor, and an inexhaustible one at that. The teacher, on tape. is ready to work with the pupil whenever and for as long as he wants to apply himself. Every learner can

progress at his own rate and go over the same material on tape again and again until he feels he has achieved mastery of the patterns.

Isolated acoustically in his private booth, and working without being observed, the pupil soon loses self-consciousness and fear of ridicule, so detrimental to language learning. The microphone into which he speaks will not giggle at him as might his classmates. Freed from the fear of embarrassment during his stumbling first efforts, the learner gains confidence because he knows he can imitate the model on tape without feeling inhibited by an audience.

In order to pronounce correctly, the learner must first hear accurately. In the laboratory, the earphones bring the sounds which Johnny is to imitate right to his inner ear. The laboratory provides a most precious ingredient of language learning: freedom from the sounds of a truck rumbling down the street: a jet screeching in the skies; and a lawn mower "putt-putting" cacophonously right beneath the classroom window.

Motivation is increased because the learner obtains immediate results of his efforts. Properly programed, the laboratory is more than an automatic drillmaster for parrot-like *Mimicry-Memorization* or passive *Listening-Comprehension* exercises. It is a self-teaching device which challenges the learner because the exercises are a continual test. However, this test is not designed to test but to teach: immediately after giving his response, Johnny hears the correct response (which he repeats) as illustrated in this diagram of a segment from a *Creative Exercise* in the patterns of plurals:

I SEE A CHILD	I see two childs	I SEE TWO CHILDREN	I see two children

CAPITAL letters indicate what the teacher has recorded and what the learner hears. Small letters show what the learner says in the pause that the teacher has left for him on the tape. In this exercise the learner gives a wrong response (childs) to the instruction, "Say that you see two of the items you will hear."

The best way of avoiding errors is to imitate the correct model often enough; the best way of *overcoming* errors is to eliminate the waiting period between error and correction. In the laboratory the learner no longer "takes his mistakes home" while the teacher corrects the papers.

In today's language laboratory (or merely with a tape recorder) the learner can also record his voice and play it back for self-evaluation. As the learner listens to himself, he compares his pronunciation and speech habits with those of the immediately preceding model he has imitated. He can now evaluate his performance because he hears himself objectively; that is, he hears himself as others hear him and not with his inner voice distorted by bone conduction. As he listens to himself, Johnny concentrates all his attention on identifying where he sounds differently from the teacher, and this is the first step to self-correction.

The late Heywood Broun once complained: "I've studied Beginners' French, and when I got to Paris I found that nobody there spoke Beginners' French." If Heywood Broun had had the chance to listen to a Parisian cab driver he would have fared better. Today's language learners in the laboratory can do precisely that: they can hear the voices of men, women, and children. Their ears become attuned to the many intonations and accents.

Languages for the Handicapped

Now that we know that any child who can hear and speak is fully capable of learning a second language and having seen that modern electronic aids can provide the innumerable hours of practice necessary for mastering it, I should like to answer this question: "Why should visually handicapped children learn a foreign language?"

Education, as I understand it, is a formative and never-ending process which helps to open the mind of a child or adult, his imagination, and his sensitivity to the fullness of experience available to him as a human being. Education means breaking out of the narrow confines of our immediate surroundings, trying to apprehend the world with all our senses. Those fortunate enough to see can apprehend the versatility of the world through the printed page which transmits the accumulated knowledge of preceding generations; they can see the statue of David or the Taj Mahal. Through their eyes they witness that human culture is wonderfully varied. And I use the word *witness* advisedly. "Witness" comes from Old Saxon *witan* which meant *to know*. As late as the 18th century, a man of wit meant an educated man and today we still use "I am at my wits' end," to indicate the exhaustion of mental resources. Those who can see then develop their wit primarily through the eye: they are *eye*-witnesses to human culture. Their sight is their "open sesame" to formative cultural values.

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I would suggest that we can help visually handicapped children to a fuller measure of the experience available to them by making them *ear*-witnesses to the culture of the world through the acquisition of one or more foreign languages. For the visually handicapped, a foreign language is indeed an "open sesame" to the formative cultural values of the world. Not only because the visually handicapped child can then "ear witness" the life of a French family from *bonjour* to *bonne nuit;* listen to a round-table discussion in Germany; or enjoy the culture of other lands through the sounds of literature, poetry, and songs; but also because the culture of a people is embedded in its language as such. Indeed, language *is* culture. If you were a man from the moon there might surely be no better way of grasping some of our traits than by understanding such homespun expressions as *Whistlestop, self-made man, go-getter,* or *fair play.* One could write a profound study on the implications contained in the fact that an American mother tells her child "*Be good,*" a German mother "*Sei brav,*" and a French mother "*Sois sage.*"

Linguistics and Understanding

Knowing a foreign language means knowing the people who speak this language. When two people begin to understand each other they say "Now you're talking my language." We should by all means exploit this unique avenue of education open to the visually handicapped, in fact, it is almost an obligation. For knowing a second language will give blind and partially seeing children more than just the ability to enjoy the culture of another people. It will give them a better perspective on American culture and a more enlightened outlook through the realization that human culture is wonderfully varied. It will enlarge their horizons by providing a listening post on new cultural patterns and new means of communication which will encourage them to reinterpret, rethink, and reconstrue by going beyond convention and habit. It will make them aware of language as a central phenomenon in life, unique to man's condition as man, and thus quicken their powers of clarity and self-expression. It will give them self-confidence, for this is one activity in which their senses have not betrayed them. Indeed, because of their more acutely developed sense of hearing, visually handicapped children may become outstanding foreign language students and excel in professions such as simultaneous interpretation. But most important of all, knowing a foreign language will promote a visually handicapped child's capacity to grow after he has left school, because we will have equipped him for the more fruitful enjoyment of leisure time, whether it be through listening to a recorded performance of *Cyrano de Bergerac,* the ability to make friends while traveling abroad, "voicesponding" with a "Tape-Pal" in France, Spain, or any other country by means of vocal letters on magnetic tape. All this will help to a broader scope of experience, a richer, happier, and more meaningful life.

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